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## William Taylor Davidson

EDITOR OF "THE FULTON DEMOCRAT," LEWISTOWN, ILLINOIS.  
ILLINOIS.

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BY SUPT. JOHN R. ROWLAND, CITY SCHOOLS, ASTORIA, ILLINOIS.

The passing of W. T. Davidson, for nearly sixty years the editor and proprietor of The Fulton Democrat, removes from the ranks of provincial journalism in this section perhaps the last of the editors of the old school, and in many respects one of the most remarkable members of the "fourth estate" that Illinois, or the Middle West, has ever produced. Mr. Davidson's death occurred at his late home in Lewistown, Illinois, on Sunday evening, January 3, 1915, after a protracted illness of over a year's duration. He was aged 77 years, 10 months and 25 days.

No adequate account of a character so unique and a career so extraordinary as that of Editor Davidson can be given in the limited compass of a paper for publication in the Journal. In lieu of the fuller and more fitting memoir which his distinguished services amply merit, the brief sketch here compiled will contain only the most salient features of a biography so rich in historical material that the history of Fulton County could be written but meagerly indeed without the truly "wondrous story" of the life and manifold activities of this militant pioneer newspaper man.

Every statement of fact made in the following article is believed to be authentic. For most of the data used herein the writer wishes at the outset to make proper acknowledgment and give due credit. He is mainly indebted, first, to two autobiographical sketches, one of which was published in The Democrat December 8, 1887, and the other in the History of Fulton County, 1906; and secondly, to an admirable and

copious "Biographical Memoir," by the Rev. J. M. D. Davidson, a nephew of the deceased journalist, which was prepared for the Memorial Number of The Fulton Democrat, February 10, 1915.

#### NOTABLE LINEAGE.

William Taylor Davidson was born in Petersburg, Menard County, Illinois, February 8, 1837, "three miles distant from the spot where at that time Abraham Lincoln was selling dry goods, groceries and whisky to the naked, hungry and thirsty pioneers." He was the son of Isham Gillham and Sarah Ann (Springer) Davidson. Both parents could trace their direct ancestry back through Revolutionary patriots to early settlers in the colonies, the father's by way of the Carolinas to old Virginia and the maternal line from Kentucky to the founding of Delaware colony.

The Davidsons come of heroic Scotch-Irish stock and the Springers are of notable Teutonic origin. Isham Gillham Davidson was a native of South Carolina, where his birth occurred in 1802. Sarah Ann Springer was born in Washington County, Kentucky, June 2, 1810. To get away from Negro slavery, both of these families moved to Illinois, the former in 1808 and the latter in 1811, and settled as near neighbors in Madison County, some fifteen miles east of St. Louis, where the children grew up together under the hard and strenuous frontier conditions of those troublous times.

During the second war with Great Britain, 1812-15, the settlers there lived much of the time in stockaded forts on account of the hostility of the Indians, the men cultivating their fields with rifles close at hands. They passed through several scenes of bloody massacres by the savages, one of which horrors the little Springer girl witnessed when only four years old. Here I. G. Davidson and Sarah A. Springer were married in 1826 and lived on a farm near Edwardsville till 1835, when they removed to Petersburg, where he established a flouring mill and owned the principal store.

The Davidson home in the village of Petersburg was a free hotel for all preachers, lawyers and strangers from every sec-

tion. Lincoln, Douglas, Peter Cartwright and many scores of others afterwards famous, were welcome and frequent guests at that humble fireside, as they continued to be later on at Lewistown. A fire destroyed the mill and the panic of '37 swept away the store and even most of the household goods. Mr. Davidson then became interested in a coach line and secured the contract for carrying the mail from Springfield to Lewistown. This brought him to the latter place as the terminus of the route.

At the time of this move, in the fall of 1838, William T. was less than two years of age. Mrs. Davidson, with the child in arms, was rowed across the Illinois River in a skiff; and it is said that the tow-headed baby thus made his entrance into Fulton county "squalling and kicking like all possessed." Although then so young, he often claimed to remember the first two houses which the family occupied in Lewistown, living about a year in each. In 1840 a cabin of logs was erected on the site in the west part of town where from that date the Davidson residence remained for more than a half-century.

In this log house, on the street which the Davidsons themselves subsequently euphoniously re-named Euclid avenue, William's childhood was spent. He had two brothers, one of whom was older and the other younger than himself, and three sisters: James Madison and Mary Francis, born in Madison County; and Lucy, Sarah and Elihu, born in Lewistown. Two other children of I. G. Davidson and wife, also born in Madison County, had died in infancy. Of this family W. T. was the last to pass away, having outlived his sister, Sarah, the next longest survivor, by nearly twenty years.

#### BOYHOOD AND SCHOOLING.

Thus graphically William himself tells of his early life: "It was common in those days for folks in this country to be poor, but our family was uncommonly poor. We never suffered for food, shelter, or clothing; but life's luxuries were unknown to us. Yet few days passed by when some minister or stranger or crowd of them, did not find a cordial welcome

at our hearthstone." And it seems a most fortunate thing for a lad of his supersensitive temperament to have had such uncommon poverty of boyhood so tempered by unstinted self-denial and blessed by "free-hearted hospitality."

As a further mitigation of the blighting effects of untoward surroundings throughout the formative period of his youth, the boy had the advantage of the wise counsel and worthy example of a father whose sound judgment and strict integrity were never questioned, and the devoted care and pious precepts of a rarely prudent and saintly mother. He quite significantly says: "I had no end of religious training, and at four years of age was so learned in Bible history that when Father McNeill, our pastor, kindly asked who had taught it to me, I told him, 'Why I always knowed it.'"

His formal schooling, however, was of the most primitive sort, scarcely equal to what as a rule the children of that period enjoyed. He was enrolled in the log cabin "pay school" at the age of four and attended fitfully two or three months in the year, missing some years entirely. "I got through Kirkham's Grammar, and do not remember a single rule. In arithmetic I got to fractions, and finally graduated in McGuffey's Third Reader and Webster's Spelling Book." But he could read and spell "fairly well," as he modestly adds, "and write in a scandalously awkward fashion."

After his twelfth year he had to go to work teaming. For five years he drove his father's team, hauling produce to the Illinois River at Havana or Liverpool, with merchandise for the return trips; or taking building stone or sand to town from adjacent quarries, coal from nearby mines, or wood from the forests primeval. While still a mere child he handled many hundred loads of stone, bricks, sand, wood and merchandise. Lads of his age nowadays can hardly comprehend the bitter cold, the frightful storms, the hardships and dangers this slight boy encountered during these youthful years.

#### BEGINS NEWSPAPER CAREER.

Before he was seventeen years old, a withered arm and frail physique led him to become a printer's apprentice, beginning

as "devil" in Hugh Lamaster's Fulton Republican office in Lewistown. From that date, April 3, 1853, he pursued the printing business during his remaining more than three score years. In the autumn of that same year, the democratic Fulton Ledger was moved from Lewistown to Canton, and the next week Lamaster promptly suspended his Whig organ which never had paid expenses. This left the county seat without a paper, and Davidson worked for awhile in Peoria and then at Macomb to finish learning his trade.

In July, 1855, his elder brother, James M. Davidson, began in Lewistown the publication of The Fulton Democrat, and William T. was summoned home from more promising fields to assist in founding that paper. He set in type the ponderous "Salutatory" of two and a half columns, and thereafter staid with the plant pretty faithfully, except that in January, 1856, he went again to Peoria and as a typesetter helped to launch The Peoria Transcript. He also did some work in another printery there, and at Tiskilwa, Illinois, and put in the winter of 1857-58 on the Havana (Illinois) Herald.

Returning to The Democrat office in the spring of 1858, in July of that year he bought a half interest in the paper and began to help fill its columns every week with slashing editorials in support of his idol, Senator Stephen A. Douglas. His debut as a writer he describes in this frank way: "I had commenced scribbling somewhat for the Macomb paper and had won a good deal of admiration for some rather saucy articles on local themes." Continuing, he explains. "Owing to illness in my brother's family, I did a good deal of slushy editorial work on The Democrat during the great Douglas-Lincoln campaign."

When the election was over, on November 12, 1858, J. M. Davidson retired from The Fulton Democrat, W. T. Davidson becoming its sole owner and editor. "It has never missed fire but a single week since that time," he wrote in 1887, "and I think there has been no issue to which I have not contributed a share of the original matter." And the last statement held true as to subsequent issues up to within a few weeks of his death; for, though he turned the paper's control over to two of

his nephews, Gaylord and Henry A. Davidson, for about a year in 1894-5, he continued making weekly contributions to its columns.

#### BECOMES TEMPERANCE ADVOCATE.

No part of Mr. Davidson's life work, through long years of valiant public service as a writer and speaker, is better known or more noteworthy than his effective warfare on the liquor traffic. In his inimitable "Autobiography," written in 1887, which has already been referred to and quoted from several times, he frankly refers to a portion of his record just preceding and following the purchase of *The Democrat*, confessing it contained little that he could "look back upon with pleasure." He does not deny or ignore any of the deplorable facts, but states them because of their bearing upon his later radically different attitude.

"It is not pleading the baby act, I trust, to remind the reader that I was a boy, and from the age of twelve had been thrown (almost helpless from physical disability and lack of education), upon my own resources, amidst surroundings of a most demoralizing character. Especially ruinous were the exciting campaigns of 1858 and 1860; and then followed the war," with all its evils and wild excesses. It was during these distressful years that the young editor fell into habits of excessive dissipation characteristic of the times and from the thrall of which few like victims have escaped.

"This is the period," he says, "to which my enemies do now often refer with a pleasure to their peculiar palates that no dainties on earth could give them. I offer no apologies, nor seek to diminish by one hair the condemnation I richly merited." The truth was bad enough, but of course there were perversions, exaggerations, slanders that followed and harassed him to the end. He vividly narrates, as below, the event that wrought his marked change of front, appending an earnest plea that the only safe way to quit drink is for the drinker at the same time to leave the drinking crowd.

"December 31st, 1865, (it was the Sabbath day), the last drop of intoxicating liquor of any kind passed my lips. From

the hour of about 6 o'clock that evening until this day I have tasted no intoxicating beverages of any sort. I want to say for the encouragement of other dissipated men that for over twenty years I have had no temptation to drink. I promptly divorced myself from the boys that continued to drink. I promptly turned ' 'bout face' in the other direction. I promptly became the bitter foe of the whisky traffic, and by tongue and pen have not spared it from that hour."

In this courageous opposition to the rum power, Mr. Davidson was among the pioneer temperance reformers. At that time the saloon interests held almost undisputed sway throughout the country. One of the earliest organized agencies to combat the evils of intemperance was the Good Templars movement. Davidson and his wife soon allied themselves with this order, joining Hillsdale Lodge of Lewistown in 1866, and he served several terms as Chief Templar. The lodge's membership came to include many of Lewistown's leading citizens, and its wholesome influence on the community was incalculable.

Editor Davidson threw himself into the new cause he had espoused with tremendous zeal and vigor, employing every means at his command. In his paper and on the platform he engaged in a relentless crusade against saloons and all forms of liquor-selling, and scathingly denounced those who aided or abetted the business in any way, including its political sponsors and apologists. His assaults on the entrenched traffic were fearless, persistent, uncompromising, irresistible; and the fighting called out his best reserve forces and developed hitherto latent powers of aggressive leadership.

#### JOURNALISTIC INDEPENDENCE.

One other result of this antagonism was inevitable and might have been expected. "From that good New-Year's Day," he declares, "the servants of the whisky traffic have been on my track. If I had been engaged in tearing down homes or murdering innocent people, I could not have been hounded with more pitiless malice." It also doubtless signaled the beginning of his defection from partisan politics.



He had ever been loyal to simon-pure Democracy, but now lost caste largely with the Democratic managers because "It was held by not a few township bosses that no man could be a true-blue Democrat and oppose the liquor traffic."

He growing independence of partyism rapidly extended to other matters of public interest, civic, social, economic, and moral; and the vigorous, radical, and startling manner in which he discussed them brought him into conflict with many persons whom he considered responsible, actively or by connivance, for the wrongs arraigned. Rev J. M. D. Davidson, in the excellent before-mentioned "Memoir" of his uncle, says: "The range of subjects he handled was of itself marvelous. Some of the evils he attacked were scarcely recognized as such until he uncovered their existence and character."

To quote further from the same authority: "Not only did he oppose political graft and corrupt party bossism, official negligence and extravagance, tax-dodging, unwise municipal policies, and in the sphere of national life, political jingoism, the 'robber tariff,' imperialism, federal paternalism, and all kindred heresies; but he paid his respects, with all the power of choice invective, sarcasm, and denunciation, to child-beaters, naggers, abusers of dumb animals, oppressors of the poor, gossips, tattlers, backbiters, and scandal-mongers, of every shade and hue and station in life."

The Fulton Democrat remained nominally, however, a stanch Democratic organ from its birth until 1882. Till then it had never "bolted" a ticket, no matter how bad, nor dreamed of lowering the party flag. But about that date, conditions within the ranks of the local organization became intolerable and The Democrat could not longer honorably support some of the party's nominees. By 1884 the situation had grown so much worse, in Editor Davidson's judgment, that he took his paper over into the Prohibition party, a step which he came to regard as the most serious blunder of his lifetime.

During the paper's brief publication under its change of policy, with the motto of "The Home against the Saloon," The Democrat gained wide recognition as one of the ablest

exponents of Prohibition principles, and subscriptions poured in from all parts of the country. But when Cleveland was elected, and other issues had come to the front, Davidson realized his mistake and fearlessly rectified it. He brought his paper back more nearly to its former allegiance by making it an "Independent Democratic Newspaper"; and found that in this freer position of almost non-partisanship, he could wield a wider influence.

Thereafter Davidson's Democrat regularly supported every Democratic presidential nominee and generally also the State and county tickets. Yet this course of action was due not to any let down of the editor's standards, but because he felt that the party, advancing on the rising tide of political idealism, had developed a higher sense of moral responsibility. For frequently and forcibly he declared, in blunt, homely phrase, that there was no party "bull-ring" in his nose or "dog-collar" around his neck; and he never hesitated to endorse any political opponent whom he believed to be subserving the people's interests.

"He was a great admirer of Theodore Roosevelt," says Dr. Davidson, the nephew above quoted, citing an instance, "though latterly his strongest confidence and admiration were given to Woodrow Wilson, whom he believed to be the greatest president since Lincoln. It has been aptly suggested by one of his friends that Mr. Davidson's liking for Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Wilson was because of their possession of certain qualities of rugged and sturdy character not unlike his own." And in this suggestion, that he possessed many of their elements of greatness, all who knew him well would fully concur.

Editor Davidson, in his autobiographical sketch of 1906, says; "Very significant and appropriate has been the motto at the head of The Democrat from its beginning,—'I'll take the responsibility.'—Jackson." It has been as free and unhampered as a northwest blizzard. It has never counted the cost in dollars or personal comfort when there were public wrongs to right or scamps of any party to expose." In its

early advocacy of every man's privilege to think and vote as he pleases, and to change his mind often and freely, **the paper** was, as in many other things, far ahead of the times and "blazed the way" for its contemporaries.

#### RADICALISM AND CONSISTENCY.

But even Davidson's friends are compelled to admit that oftentimes his brilliant and intrepid methods of championing or antagonizing a proposition were also radical and extreme, such as to rouse violent opposition and deter full adherence. "Poltroon" was a favorite term for him to apply to anybody unwilling to go to the logical limit of his or her convictions. He could not tolerate halfway measures or see the value of caution when dealing with matters that seemed imperative, as a consequence he often failed to enlist the solid backing of the better element who thought him sincere but untactful in his battles against wrongdoings.

"There is much to say," contends Dr. Davidson, "in explanation and even in justification of his strenuous methods. His early training in the school of journalism was in a day when extreme language was the only kind expected or understood. An editor who could not overwhelm an opponent with satire and invective was unworthy of support. He held to the theory that the best way of showing up an evil was to handle it without gloves. His thought in using strong language undoubtedly was to shock and startle men into a realization of what he believed to be true, and which, it must be in fairness admitted, generally was the truth."

Unquestionably it was this trenchant, caustic, "meat-ax" style of writing that enabled him to make good his proud boast of printing a paper which everybody wanted to "snatch hot from the press and read to tatters." What he printed was read and nobody yawned over it. Readers might say that it was "outrageous," "extreme," "visionary," or "unwise"; but they seldom denied the writer's sincerity of opinion. Of foolish consistency, which Emerson rightly calls "the hobgoblin of little minds," he was totally unafraid. Denying any

change in essential principles, he claimed only to be always and thoroughly consistent with himself.

Again quoting his nephew: "One aspect of Mr. Davidson's character that sometimes lent color to the charge of inconsistency, was his way of treating his antagonist after a fight was over. He could not harbor enmity. He opposed men with all the resources at his command; and yet, whatever the outcome of the contest, he could not go on indefinitely without coming to some terms of amity. He was of a most generous nature, and anyone in trouble, whether friend or foe, could be sure of his efficient assistance. He was able, by timely and tactful acts of kindness, to make lasting friends of some of those who had been his bitterest enemies."

Animated by the dominant wish to make the old world and its people better and more comfortable, the editor avers he has never been deeply concerned about the rights of stalwart men, but has ever gone into the last red ditch of radicalism in defense of women, children, and dumb animals. And now that the battle smoke has cleared away, men are found accepting as commonplace the startling truths he thundered into their ears. "Thus, in spite of the methods that often seemed extreme, and in many cases really because of them, The Fulton Democrat went on its way, accomplishing its mission of righteousness, uplift, and reform."

How he gradually but noticeably, as the years passed, softened his manner of combatting prevalent evils and the persons or agencies held accountable for them, without any abandoning of his ideals or abatement of vigor and efficacy, the files of the paper conclusively show. Probably this change is best illustrated by the mellowing tone observable in the noted series of alleged interviews and communications ascribed to "Uncle Zeb," which began in 1881 and ran an irregular course through some twenty volumes. Davidson was the author of nothing perhaps more uniquely original or deservedly popular than these versatile articles.

This fictitious character, genial, garrulous, grouchy, philosophical, was created as a convenient mouthpiece. Dr. Davidson says: "In the guise of a rheumatic, choleric, gouty old

bachelor, who is described as coming into the office once a week or so, smoking a briar-root pipe and discoursing familiarly, Editor Davidson facetiously, sarcastically, often tenderly, but always effectively, voiced his views on subjects of the day. It is in these comments that he reveals, as time goes on, his realization of the greater effectiveness of gentler methods in advocating needed reforms."

The December 4, 1895, issue of *The Democrat*, when the old editor had resumed charge after a year's sojourn in Texas, contains "Uncle Zeb's" promise: "I'm going to quit finding fault with people. Of course there's exceptions to all rules. I'll never let up on whisky-sellers, and fools that kill song birds, and parents that nag their children, and beasts that whip their babies." And he kept the spirit of that pledge. While he waged many a subsequent battle, yet his censures were usually milder and his criticisms kinder and more judicious, though his writings and speech retained to the last their old-time picturesqueness and originality.

#### IMPORTANT ENTERPRISES PROMOTED.

Thus far the greater stress has properly been put upon W. T. Davidson's aggressiveness as a reformer and his successful campaigns against wickedness in places high and low. But another phase of his multifarious activity, resulting in various remarkable achievements, remains to be briefly delineated. This was the invaluable service he rendered his immediate locality, particularly the city of Lewistown, along defensive and constructive lines, the two motives in many instances being combined to the same end. Only the most important enterprises so promoted can be here summarized.

Of Davidson's stupendous efforts in Lewistown's behalf, the very prominent part he took in the fierce county-seat fights affords the most conspicuous example; for to his devoted loyalty, subtle foresights, rare initiative, and determined execution, more than to any other factor, is due that town's final triumph in its prolonged struggle to remain the capital of old Fulton County. He conceived the strategic idea that the surest way for Lewistown to substantiate its claims and

hold the shire-town honors was to make it an up-to-date city, with buildings and public utilities equal to those of any place in the county.

In 1876, he was one of a number of public-spirited citizens to initiate the movement that ultimately built the Beadles opera-house block and other new business structures, which placed the city in the front rank of cities of its size in metropolitan equipment and appearance. In the terrific contest of 1878 with Canton, he instigated the building of a narrow-gauge railroad through the county, from north to south, directly connecting Lewistown with the towns of northern Fulton. It was mainly through his instrumentality that the Fulton County Narrow Gauge Railway became a prospective certainty and undoubtedly caused Canton's defeat.

Mr. Davidson was a prime mover in organizing the Lewistown Building and Loan Association, in 1884, which proved a mighty stimulus to the city's progress. For years he had urged the installation of an adequate water system for the city. In 1888, instead of favoring a proposed deep-well project, he advocated the placing of some drive wells and a pumping station in Spoon River valley, four miles away. This plan was fortunately adopted. At his suggestion, the improvement was financed by the creation of a water-works corporation which established the plant, the municipality finally buying up the stock.

Herculean attempts were made in the years from 1880 to 1890 by Davidson and other enterprising business men to put Lewistown on the map as a manufacturing point. Among the industries inaugurated and fostered during that decade are the iron foundry, canning and can factories, the Pontius Woodenware factory, Duplex Novelty works, and others; and some of them were profitably conducted for a while. But the increasing pressure of capitalistic combinations irresistibly forced these plants to close their doors, as it likewise did the flouring and woolen mills in all the smaller places.

Another worthy enterprise of this period was the futile attempt to revive the former Lewistown college. In 1888, private parties bought the fine old building, refurnished it,

and started a normal and commercial school. To prevent the untimely collapse of the venture early the next year, a joint stock company was formed, with W. T. Davidson as its president, which took over the property and chartered Central Normal College. For two years the institution prospered encouragingly, and its ultimate suspension was no impeachment of the wisdom or devotion of the promoters.

But the final undertaking and crowning effort to save Lewistown's "one ewe lamb," as *The Democrat* termed it, was the erection of the new court house. The contest in 1888 for the removal of the county buildings to Cuba, more nearly in the county's geographical center, resulted in victory again for Lewistown, but left the contention open for renewal ten years later. On December 14, 1894, the historic old court house was burned. Many contend that had Davidson been here, the fire would never have happened; and unquestionably the event hastened his return to help solve the vexed problems arising from that unfortunate occurrence.

From the start he insisted that the only honorable thing to do was for Lewistown to raise the money and erect a court house for Fulton County. After a scheme for raising the necessary amount by the sale of lots in a newly laid-out addition to the city had been tried and found impracticable, Davidson suggested and pushed to its consummation a popular subscription by which the required sum was secured; and a superb structure, costing over \$40,000, was erected and presented to the county in 1897, settling the county-seat question. Throughout the hard canvass for the funds, he kept the public fully informed, illustrating one of his biggest hobbies—publicity.

Davidson's energetic concern in Lewistown's prosperity and upbuilding continued unabated to the end of his life. Not only had he inspired and impelled to completion the sundry major improvements, as noted, but the city turned to him as the natural leader in all feasible schemes offered for the betterment of local conditions of every kind, until impaired health no longer permitted his active participation in municipal affairs. Among his later activities was an intelligent

and helpful interest in the extension of the Illinois Electric Interurban system from Canton to the county seat.

#### LOCAL OPTION FIGHT.

With the troublesome court-house controversy ended, however, in the compensatory, sacrificingly magnanimous manner for which Mr. Davidson stood the principal sponsor, as for nearly half a century he had borne the brunt of battle in the old town's every extremity, the aged editor was destined to engage in few more spirited conflicts. By far the most important of these was the noble and winning fight for local option made in connection with the valorous Anti-Saloon League, to which he lent his ardent editorial sanction and donated his platform services, during the years between 1903 and 1908.

For the veteran campaigner it was but the continuation of that "irrepressible conflict" between himself and the liquor forces begun a generation before. As previously stated, he had lost faith in Prohibition partyism as a means of abolishing the drink traffic, and his espousal of local option was based upon observation of its successful operation elsewhere, especially in the southern states. He thoroughly "stumped" the legislative district, making many speaking tours through all its parts; and the results vindicated his hopes in the movement, all of Fulton County and large sections of the State becoming saloonless territory.

#### SYMPATHY FOR THE DISTRESSED.

In discussing his uncle's deeper impulses that prompted the policies he pursued, the Rev. Dr. Davidson fervently declares: "It is but just to say there was ever the underlying motive of unselfish patriotism and sympathy for the poor and oppressed. He was always for the 'under dog.' If in his sympathies he seemed sometimes impractical and over-sentimental, he was nevertheless given credit for absolute sincerity. People knew where he might be found on all issues between strength and weakness, the privileged and unprivileged, the rich and the poor."



Several matters of local import not yet mentioned herein decisively attest this true estimate of his unselfishness and compassion for the helpless and unfortunate. The Lewistown bank failure of 1893 furnished an instance. In the anxiety and excessive bitterness incident to that serious disaster, he pleaded kindly forbearance, and recommended a line of procedure that avoided wasteful litigation and saved a larger division of the assets to the depositors than they would otherwise have received. His earnest endeavors were to restore peace, confidence, and good-will among all classes.

Though consistently favoring public improvements, nor hesitating to urge them at the cost of sacrifice and temporary privation, if necessity demanded, as in building the court house, he felt that ordinarily the city's development should be along conservative lines, such as to put no unnecessary burdens upon the poorer citizenry. So, while *The Democrat* had long argued for a large sewer through the business part of town, when the council in 1910 adopted plans to provide the whole city with sewers, the paper logically protested that the outlay would entail a hardship on many people.

Likewise when later extensive street paving was projected, *The Democrat's* editor, as champion of the widows and indigent families affected, again used his fluent pen and tongue, now feebling with age and frequent illness, to proclaim valid objections against the vast expenditure and increased taxation involved. He devotedly loved Lewistown, took immense pride in the town's past, and was ambitiously optimistic about its future; and yet he preferred to have it develop conservatively rather than that the struggling poor should be burdened with extra taxes or special assessments.

More than mere mention should be made of his ceaseless warring upon all forms of brutality and injustice to the erring and weak; for it extended actively through his entire journalistic career. Especially was he insistent on the rights of children. Repeatedly and in vitriolic terms he pitilessly denounced constant scolding or nagging of the young, and the vials of his bitterest wrath were poured out upon users of corporal punishment, at home or in school. And it cannot be

denied that these preachments were most potent in ameliorating the old crude and harsh methods of child-training.

Further says Dr. Davidson: "He ceaselessly voiced his antipathy to every form of cruelty to and mistreatment of dumb animals, as represented in check-reining, overloading, whipping, or yelling at horses; neglect to water poultry or live stock; wanton killing of song birds; and all kinds of savage sports. His persistent campaign was undoubtedly influential beyond what he himself realized. For the change came quietly; men who would scarcely acknowledge that influence, gradually fell in with the new ideas of kindness, conservation, and justice that were coming to the front everywhere, of which Editor Davidson was the pioneer leader and prophet."

#### MARKED PERSONAL TRAITS.

He had an intense love of nature, especially in her primitive aspects. Extremely fond of the diversified scenery about Lewistown, the hills, vales, woods, and streams, he spent many hours rambling amidst the familiar scenes dear to him from childhood. He viewed with sorrow the resistless encroachments of modern times upon these objects of his attachment, bitterly lamenting the destruction of the forests and feeling that much of it here as elsewhere was needless and unwise. Holding advanced ideas that have since become accepted tenets of political and social economy, he was a forerunner in the gospel of the conservation of our natural resources.

Other marked individual traits of his many-sided character deserve more than a passing notice. "In his personality," says his chief biographer, Dr. Davidson, "he exhibited the rugged and untrammelled instincts of centuries of pioneer ancestry. Withal, his was an urbane and genial temperament." An inimitably entertaining conversationalist, he was a charming teller of stories—especially incidents of his own experience or falling under his direct observation. No one could resist him when he drew from the reminiscent storehouse of an eventful calling, nor suffer a moment's ennui in his delightful company.

Says Dr. Davidson: "He always took a profound interest in young people, and in many ways tried to befriend them and further their interests. An example of this was seen when he opened his addition to Lewistown in 1883. In selling these lots, he gave specially favorable terms to deserving young men and in some cases never exacted full payment from them. On his visit to Los Angeles in 1911, to deliver an address to the reunion of the Fulton County colony, he received many evidences of love and gratitude from those to whom as boys and girls he had at different times given aid and helpful counsel."

The same writer mentions one other peculiarity of his illustrious uncle which he thinks explains many things in Mr. Davidson's career puzzling alike to friends and foes. This was "his possession of an uncanny intuition, amounting almost to a psychic power, by which he seemed to be able to divine the thoughts of men, or events at a distance or in the near future. Sometimes, however, he was given credit for the use of his intuitive powers, in gaining a knowledge of men's plans, when it was accomplished rather through clever management and shrewd judgment."

Two more paragraphs from his nephew's reliable and well-written "Biographical Memoir" must be quoted in this connection: "Another trait in Mr. Davidson's makeup, inherited from heroic ancestors and developed in his own contest with pioneer conditions and frequent contact with men in whom the brute nature was dominant, was his marked physical courage. Though frail from boyhood, and with one arm nearly helpless, he knew not the meaning of fear. This characteristic so impressed itself upon men, that it was always counted on in any contest with him. It was an accepted axiom that 'Davidson cannot be frightened or bullied from his position.'

"There were many instances in his life where he found himself in a position where any display of the white feather would have been fatal to his purpose, and even dangerous to his person; but he always met such emergencies with fearlessness and adroitness, often coupled with a display of good

humor, that left him master of the situation. This quality of courage with him was more than physical. Its spring and basis was that moral courage which comes from a sound conviction of right and sense of duty, and back of all a foundation of faith in righteousness as the shield and sure reward of every true man in his battle for the right."

#### RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES.

No one is better qualified to tell of his church membership and views than this reverend nephew, who writes: "Mr. Davidson inherited a deeply religious nature from a long line of Christian men and women. Uncle Dick Haney used to say that 'piety was hereditary in the Davidson family.' While not a church member in his earlier life, he was never a mocker of religion, or a disbeliever; and ever supported the cause of religion and the work of the church. In 1880, with the suddenness of decision that characterized so many of his acts, he personally embraced the faith of his fathers and allied himself with the fellowship of God's people.

"While it was impossible that he should ever be hampered closely by the tenets of any church, he decided to cast in his lot with his wife, and became a member of the Presbyterian church. From that time on he never faltered in his Christian allegiance. There were times when his touch with the activities of the church was less close than at others, and in some cases he found himself at variance with its policies and leaders. But the churches always knew him for their friend, and there were very few months of his life when he did not lend his personal presence and active aid to the services and work of the church.

"For some years he had charge of the young men's Bible class in the Presbyterian Sunday school, with a membership of 100 or more. There never was a dull moment in this class, as Mr. Davidson's interpretations of the Scripture lessons, while often startling, were always such as to leave a lifelong impression for good. He used frequently to visit the weekly prayer meetings in the various churches. He would listen attentively, and when called upon would make a talk that

would be an inspiration to those present. During his last days he gave abundant testimony to the comfort and reality his religious experience had been to him."

Rev. B. Y. George, another clergyman who knew him intimately, pays this tribute: "There was in him a deep religious element which was often and for long obscured by his fierce controversies, and by a style of speech acquired in the cruder pioneer times. But I was often struck with this, that when a man who had been wild, reckless, and intemperate, listened to some better promptings of his own soul and wanted to start in the direction of a sober and Christian life, he more frequently turned to W. T. Davidson for help than to us preachers, or our more well-known Christian co-laborers, seeming to think he was nearer and could better understand."

#### SOUGHT NO OFFICE.

Upon his assumption of the editorship of *The Fulton Democrat*, Mr. Davidson was at once projected into politics and from that time forth always took an active and absorbing interest in affairs of state. Constantly and closely associated with politicians, great and small, he learned the "game" perfectly, as it is played by its shrewdest and most adept votaries, occasionally fair and square though generally "any old way" to win. Becoming early disgusted with the guile, subterfuge, and chicanery commonly practiced, he aspired to no office nor sought any sort of political preferment.

However, he did hold the office of county superintendent of schools (then known as school commissioner) for one term, 1863-5; and was also city alderman of Lewistown for one year—which he declared to be "the longest and most uncomfortable year of his life." He was often selected as delegate to county, district, and state conventions of his party; served at one time as president of the Military Tract Press Association, and held leading positions at times in the various benevolent orders to which he belonged. Aside from these official stations, he lived from choice a private citizen.

#### LITERARY STYLE AND FORENSIC POWER.

Both as a writer and speaker, Mr. Davidson was original,

independent, dauntless, forceful, luminous, convincing, unique. His style is difficult of analysis, and varied with the subject treated or as the occasion required; but it was always distinct, cogent, effectual. Nothing in his writings or speeches was commonplace or uninteresting. Master of an exceptional vocabulary, much of the puissant and widespread influence he wielded is ascribable to his lucid diction and facile aptness of expression in writing or speaking. He was admired, feared, and sometimes hated for this singular ability that made him a powerful advocate or formidable opponent.

The Rev. Dr. George, once before quoted, who is an erudite scholar, an exhaustive reader, and a literary critic of keen discrimination, pertinently observes: "W. T. Davidson had a mind strong, brilliant, and intense. He acquired a style natural and simple, but individual and inimitable. His wit would sometimes strike like lightning. His genial humor would sometimes resemble the warm light which an old-time fireplace threw over all the room. His pathos would often melt the hearts of all readers; and, though he never wrote verse, his imagination was that of a poet."

His two distinctive excursions into the field of general literature indicated a special talent in that direction which might readily have been developed and successfully applied. In 1890, collaborating with Miss Margaret Gilman George, he wrote a story, entitled "the Yellow Rose," which was published serially in *The Fulton Democrat*. The incidents of the plot centered around the romantic adventures of a real personage, the late Capt. William Phelps of Lewistown, a pioneer fur trader, the "Rose" being the doughty captain's young and beautiful wife, so named by the Indians.

Soon followed another serial which was also a romance of the days when Illinois Territory formed the western frontier of modern civilization. Its title, "Dr. Davison," was the name of the somewhat mythical earliest white inhabitant within the present boundaries of Fulton County, whom the first settlers, in 1820, found living here as a hermit. The scene is located in the main chapters on the banks of Spoon

River, called in the story by its former Indian name, "River Mequeen." Publishers made him flattering offers to issue these thrilling, dramatic stories in book form, but the busy author never took the time to prepare them for re-publication.

As a platform orator, Mr. Davidson had a commanding presence, a mellow, clarion-like voice, and a rapid, impassioned, overwhelming delivery. During many campaigns he was in great demand as a speaker at political meetings; but in later years, as his powers matured, more calls came than could be met for him to speak at reunions of pioneers, anniversaries, educational gatherings, and like events, in widely-distant parts of the country. His forcible English, clear reasoning, ready wit, racy humor, compelling pathos, picturesque imagery, apt illustrations, felicitous phrases, and vivacious manner would profoundly thrill and sway an audience.

While his set addresses must have been carefully prepared, much of Mr. Davidson's public speaking was entirely impromptu, being called forth by the exigencies of the occasion. Many of those who often heard him think that at such times he was at his very best. In these spontaneous, offhand efforts, when he was advocating some cause dear to his heart, his oratory possessed all the qualities of true eloquence; it would hold his audience literally spellbound, and finally sweep them en masse from an attitude of passive indifference or opposition to one of frantic, cheering approbation.

Perhaps Mr. Davidson's last effort notably of this kind was the one so feelingly referred to, after his death, in Editor C. E. Snively's tribute in his Canton Register, when the brave old hero arose from a sick bed, in December, 1912, and appeared before the board of supervisors to plead for the proper housing of the county's poor. "That was a ten-minute speech in behalf of poverty and helplessness," says Mr. Snively, "that swayed, electrified, and changed indifference into shamed and eager interest. Ever since that hour the feeling among the members of the county board has been that the new, modernly-constructed building must soon come."

#### ORATION ON DOUGLAS.

The following quotation from the "Memoir" well portrays

this masterpiece: "The greatest forensic effort of Mr. Davidson's life was his oration on Stephen A. Douglas, originally delivered, in its complete form, at the fiftieth anniversary of the Douglas-Lincoln debate in Freeport, August 27, 1908. He had known Douglas and Lincoln in childhood, as we have seen, and often met them in later life. A devoted admirer or both, he had come to feel that the great services of Douglas to the cause of the Union were, through misunderstanding or neglect, in danger of being forgotten by the American people.

"In this oration, which was carefully prepared, historically accurate, and a model of eloquent diction, Mr. Davidson paid a glowing eulogy to both of these great statesmen, and showed how their political differences were forgotten, as during the early days of the war, they stood shoulder to shoulder for the defense of the common country. He showed that with a patriotism and magnanimity little realized at the time, or at the present, Senator Douglas consecrated his services to the Union cause, and while a dying man made addresses at Chicago and Springfield that perhaps saved Illinois to the Union at the beginning of the war.

"This oration Mr. Davidson afterward repeated in a number of places over the state, last and most notably at a meeting held in the state house at Springfield, April 23, 1913, on the one hundredth anniversary of Douglas's birth. On this occasion he delivered this address with new inspirational touches, before the members of the legislature, judges of the supreme court, and other prominent men, from Chicago and elsewhere. This oration alone entitles him to be ranked as one of the ablest orators of his day." And the judgment here expressed will be cordially concurred in by all competent critics who are properly informed.

His pathetic closing plea for his idolized statesman and patriot was as follows: "To aged and feeble for this loving duty, unschooled in oratory, I am here pleading with my fellow countrymen to help me bring back to glowing life the long dead and misunderstood, if not forgotten, Stephen A. Douglas. When the truth of history is made plain—when the rounded



centennial of the Great Debate shall be celebrated in this fair city of Freeport,—a grateful nation in its Hall of Fame, high up beside the honored name of the immortal Lincoln, will have placed in letters of living light the adored name of Stephen Arnold Douglas.”

#### FILLED EDITORIAL SPHERE.

It is not too much to say that Davidson belongs in the small class of really great editors; that he was to Illinois provincial journalism what Bennett, Greeley, Dana, Storey, Medill and other master journalists were to national newspaperdom. He filled and dominated his restricted sphere as thoroughly and well as they did their larger fields. Of the true editor's province and prerogatives he had the loftiest conception, magnifying his calling and exalting the mission of the press. While endowed in full measure with the sterner attributes, as already stated, he was withal just and generous, honorable, compassionate, great-souled.

Prof. H. L. Roberts, whose long familiarity with the paper and close intimacy with the man make his contribution credible, justly extols them thus: “The Fulton Democrat was the main instrument by which Mr. Davidson made his leadership effective. He made his paper most admirably unique. He made it good and he made it great. He saturated it with his own delightful, inspiring personality. And to the most of us The Democrat and Davidson were one. In the evolution of his newspaper is traced the development of its remarkable editor; but the change was as gradual as that of the seasons.”

Continuing, Professor Roberts vividly depicts The Democrat's gradually softening tone of pugnacity and impetuosity, and its finally changed status; and then as to the happy consequences, he asserts: “It gained a constituency of the best and most thoughtful people who looked to it for inspiration, who sought its opinions and respected them, whether agreeing with them always or not. Its political discussions rose to a plane not reached outside of the great independent newspapers and magazines. Its editorials commanded the attention of presidents and other leaders, of all parties, who were generous in their praise.”

"From the news and personal items of *The Democrat*," adds this writer, "he culled out the trivialities, printing only what seemed worth while. It was characteristic of his wisdom as well as his kindness that youthful transgressors were protected as much as possible from the evil consequences of their follies and mistakes, by keeping their names and misadventures out of print. On the other hand, even the small successes of any boy or girl from Fulton County that made good out in the world were always heralded with sincere pride and satisfaction. Every issue carried a subtle message of encouragement and inspiration—a challenge to higher living."

"Davidson and his *Democrat* were never more delightful," concludes Mr. Roberts, "than in the later years when reminiscences gradually became dominant. One rare treat he gave his readers was 'Old Days in Fulton County' which ran for many months. He went back to the first issues of *The Democrat* and taking the old numbers seriatim, gave summary of the news recorded therein, illuminated with his own characteristic comment. Not infrequently were thrown in quaint criticisms of the shortcomings of the editor of the early days, as impersonal as if that editor had been some other than himself. It was a magnificent panorama."

As an editor, therefore, W. T. Davidson achieved his surest claim to fame. And *The Fulton Democrat* is his enduring monument. Through that paper's weekly visits to thousands of households, where an eager welcome awaited each issue, he vitally touched the lives of countless numbers, especially of younger folks, who never or seldom were vouchsafed an opportunity to hear the editor's gifted tongue. His arduous editorial labors for wellnigh threescore eventful years of storm and shine made the most lasting impress upon his age, "moved the dark world nearer to the sun."

#### HOME LIFE.

On January 24, 1860, William T. Davidson was united in marriage with Miss Lucinda M. Miner of Columbus, Ohio. For their wedding journey the pair went on an editors' excursion to the East, where they visited Washington and heard

Senator Douglas deliver one of his impassioned, electrifying speeches in the United States Senate on topics then agitating the nation. In an interview with him afterwards, the "Little Giant" took the young couple by the hands, warmly greeted them familiarly by their first names, as was his custom with acquaintances, and graciously wished them godspeed.

Their wedded life extended through nearly thirty-four years, Mrs. Davidson dying on Christmas Day, 1893. Very often in later days Mr. Davidson referred with deep feeling to the unselfish love and loyal devotion of this blessed woman who uncomplainingly shared the struggles and triumphs of his earlier manhood, and continued his discreet counsellor, congenial companion, and faithful helpmeet till her departure left him desolate. To them seven children were born: Harold L., Mabel, Bertha B., Frances M., Lulu M., Nellie, and Maude G., all of whom survive except Mabel and Nellie who died in infancy.

Mr. Davidson was intensely domestic in his habits and home-loving in disposition. He was again married, April 3, 1895, in Dallas, Texas, to Miss Margaret Gilman George, eldest daughter of Rev. Benj. Y. and Adeline (Gilman) George, of Elmwood, Illinois. She was a woman of lovely individuality and brilliant intellectual endowments. A writer of exquisite verse, Miss George found ready acceptance of her poems by "The Century Magazine," "The Youth's Companion," and other high-class periodicals. Her sudden death occurred November 27, 1897. One son was born to this union, William Gilman.

#### ILLNESS AND DEATH.

Quoting once more the good dominie, from whose splendid biographical article matter for this paper has already been so liberally extracted: "Mr. Davidson's last days were marked by great feebleness, but happily not by severe suffering. A trouble of many years' standing developed serious complications about a year ago, and from that on there was a gradual weakening of the physical powers. His mind continued clear most of the time, and he was able to see and

converse with friends up to the last two or three weeks. On Monday after Christmas he was taken worse, and in a day or two lapsed into a condition of coma, from which he did not rally."

On the first Sunday of the new year, about five o'clock in the afternoon, came the summons; and he went peacefully to rest like a tired child falls asleep. All the surviving members of the immediate family were at his bedside when he passed away. "The end was peace—peace of body, peace of mind, peace of soul." When the dread tidings of his passing flashed forth, and the word passed from lip to lip, "W. T. Davidson is dead!" the atmosphere of city and county was tense with grief and sympathy. For he had enshrined his name in the minds and hearts of the whole community which had known him so long, as few men have ever done.

*"Life's race well run;  
Life's work well done;  
Life's crown well won;  
He rests well."*

#### FUNERAL SERVICES.

For appointed hours on Tuesday afternoon and again on Wednesday forenoon, the body of the deceased lay in state at the family residence in Lewistown. At 1:30 o'clock, Wednesday afternoon, January 6, under lowering skies and amidst occasional downpours of rain and sleet, the remains were taken to the Presbyterian church building, where appropriate and impressive services were conducted by the pastor, Rev. J. T. Sullivan, assisted by the Revs. J. W. Pruen and A. K. Tullis of the Methodist Episcopal church; C. W. Young of the Free Methodist church; B. Y. George of the Presbyterian church, Elmwood; and J. M. D. Davidson of the Episcopal church, Macomb.

Notwithstanding the very inclement weather, the large auditorium was packed to its full capacity, and many waited in the lecture room and corridor to tender by their presence a last token of respect to the honored dead. The floral offerings were lavish and beautiful, among the finest and most elaborate

ever seen in Fulton's shire-city. It looked as if the icy hand of winter had reached far backward through two seasons and from the depths of midsummer had brought the choicest blossoms to garland the bier of him who while alive had so loved flowers and birds and little children.

The exercises consisted of a vocal solo, "Lead Kindly Light," sweetly sung by Mrs. J. B. Henry; a touching prayer by Dr. George; short Scripture reading by Rev. Tullis; the funeral discourse by Pastor Sullivan; a brief, earnest talk by Rev. Pruen; prayer by Rev. Young; song, "Jerusalem the Golden," by a mixed quartet of well blended voices; and the benediction. Rev. Sullivan's sermon was scholarly, virile, eloquent, replete with historical allusions and fervent encomiums. It was based on the fitly applicable text, Job 5:26—"Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in his season."

The massive casket, covered with a beautiful blanket of pink and white roses, was borne to and from the hearse by city officials, representatives of the Fulton County press acting as honorary pallbearers. Nearly one hundred members of the Masonic fraternity from lodges in Lewistown and neighboring cities served as an escort to the grave in Oak Hill cemetery, where the stately burial rites of Freemasonry were given. Following the ritualistic ceremony came the closing service by the ministers present, the while through the native forest trees the bleak winds of a wintry blizzard sang sad requiems over his last resting place.

#### EXTRACTS FROM TRIBUTES.

On January 5, the city council of Lewistown met and adopted strong resolutions of respect for their distinguished fellow-citizen. These contained this expressive sentence: "Hundreds of families owe their happiness to him." They also recommended that the business houses be closed during the hours of the obsequies; and this request was unanimously complied with. Other local organizations held meetings and took similar action, acknowledging his unrequited benefices; deploring the city's irreparable loss in his death, and joining in messages of condolence to the bereaved family.

At a meeting of the Military Tract Press Association, held in Galesburg, January 22, a memorial to the late editor formed a feature of the afternoon session. Many speakers participated in the program, all voicing the general appreciation of the noble life and worthy deeds of their lamented fellow-worker. A resolution of regard was passed, highly eulogistic but entirely veracious. Here is one of its statements: "He was a man among men, whose life was one which all our members might well emulate, and whose death is a loss which will leave a void in our ranks hard to fill."

Newspapers generally throughout Central Illinois commented editorially on the veteran editor's demise. From these numerous editorial utterances, only a few brief, pregnant extracts can here be given: "Men of less stature have been governors and presidents." "Probably no man in Fulton County has had greater influence on its history." "Measured by his activity, things accomplished, duty faithfully performed, his life was a long one." "He was a lover of truth and justice, a friend of the erring, a foe of hypocrites, and a disciple of the higher and better things of life." "In the pantheon dedicated to illustrious memories, we place his name."

Personal tributes received from readers and friends, near and far, fill many pages. A bare half-dozen short, typical sentences, extracted almost at random, must suffice: "The world will not seem the same to me since he is gone." "The world is bigger, brighter for his living in it; it is the lonelier for his leaving it." "His was ever a stimulating influence in my own life, and I can fully understand the worshipful love with which he was regarded by other young men." "He was a great editor who served well his day and generation." "He never failed anyone who needed him." "Fulton County has produced many great men, but none greater than William Taylor Davidson."